

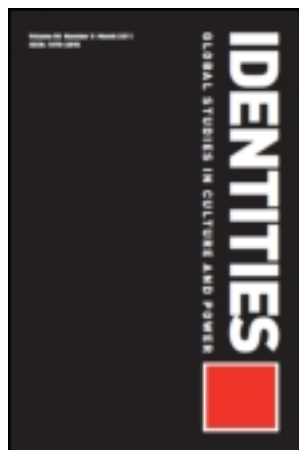
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### Anthropological Takes on (Im)Mobility

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## Introduction

### Anthropological Takes on (Im)Mobility

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*In this introduction, we outline the general conceptual framework that ties the various contributions to this special issue together. We argue for the importance of anthropology to “take on” mobility and discuss the advantages of the ethnographic approach in doing so. What is the analytical purchase of mobility as one of the root metaphors in contemporary anthropological theorizing? What are the (dis)advantages of looking at the current human condition through the lens of mobility? There is a great risk that the fast-growing field of mobility studies neglects different interpretations of what is going on, or that only patterns that fit the mobilities paradigm will be considered, or that only extremes of (hyper)mobility or (im)mobility will be given attention. The ethnographic sensibilities of field-workers who learn about mobility while studying other processes and issues, and who can situate movement in the multiple contexts between which people move, can both extend the utility of the mobilities approach, and insist on attention to other dynamics that might not be considered if the focus is first and last on (im)mobility as such. In this special issue, we do not want to discuss human mobility as a brute fact but rather analyze how mobilities, as sociocultural constructs, are experienced and imagined.*

*Key Words:* Mobility, immobility, anthropology, ethnography

Mobility as a concept-metaphor captures the common impression that our lifeworlds are in constant flux, with not only people, but also cultures, objects, capital, businesses, services, diseases, media, images, information, and ideas circulating across the planet. Among social scientists, it is fashionable these days to study migration, diaspora, and exile; cosmopolitanism and transnationalism; global markets and commodity chains; and global information and communication technologies, media, and popular culture. The literature is replete

with metaphorical conceptualizations attempting to describe perceived altered spatial and temporal movements: deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and scapes; time-space compression or distantiation; the network society and its space of flows; the death of distance and the acceleration of modern life; nomadology; and diverse mobilities. The upsurge of interest in mobility goes hand in hand with theoretical approaches that reject a “sedentarist metaphysics” (Malkki 1992) in favor of a “nomadic metaphysics” (Cresswell 2006) and an increase in empirical studies on the most diverse kinds of movements, questioning the taken-for-granted bonds between people, place, and culture. While previously, scholars tended to ignore or regard border-crossing movements as deviations from normative place-bound communities, cultural homogeneity, and social integration, discourses of globalization, and cosmopolitanism (which became dominant since the end of the Cold War) seem to have shifted the pendulum in the opposite direction, mobility being promoted as normality, and place attachment as a digression or resistance against globalizing forces.

By limiting the scope to transnational human mobilities, we can identify many different types of border crossers: tourists and pilgrims; migrants and refugees; diplomats, businesspeople, and those working for international organizations; NGO workers and people belonging to the most diverse networks; students and researchers; sportspeople and artists; soldiers and journalists; and those in the traffic and transport industries who move people (including themselves) around. Notwithstanding the many kinds of involuntary or forced movements, mobility generally evokes a positive valence, denoting (1) the ability to move; (2) the ease or freedom of movement; and (3) the tendency to change easily or quickly. This translates to three commonly held assumptions that have been widely spread in discussions about globalization: (1) there is (increasing) mobility; (2) mobility is a self-evident phenomenon; and (3) mobility generates change—often conceived of as an improvement (progress), for oneself and one’s kin (e.g., migrants) or for nonrelated others (e.g., NGO workers). Indeed, people link horizontal or geographical mobility almost automatically with vertical—economic (financial), social (status), and cultural (cosmopolitan)—“climbing.” In sum, mobility entails much more than mere movement; it is infused with meaning (Frello 2008; Greenblatt 2009). Moreover, mobility “means different things, to different people, in differing social circumstances” (Adey 2006: 83).

Two important caveats here. First, mobility is not a unique feature of our times. Archaeological and historical records show that humankind has always been characterized by mobility and that certain groups were more mobile in the past than they are now (Barnard

and Wendrich 2008). Throughout history, people have traveled vast distances, engaging in complex networks of cross-cultural exchanges and creating translocal identifications. Long-standing views that the majority of societies were traditionally relatively static and immobile have been countered by empirical research that reveals considerable fluidity, of both a spontaneous and an involuntary nature (e.g., de Bruijn, van Dijk, and Foeken 2001), and showing that some people feel “at home in movement” or “settle within mobility” (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 27). Among certain populations (e.g., in West Africa), mobility has been the rule rather than the exception and migration, including across current borders, central to livelihoods and survival (Jónsson 2008). The factors that have determined such “culture of migration” (Carling and Åkesson 2009; Cohen 2004; Hahn and Klute 2007) have been complex and variable. Changes in the way humans are (im)mobile dramatically affect other aspects of life, making the study of mobility critical to understanding human evolutionary change as well as social change (Kelly 1992).

Even the most rooted communities engage in border-crossing mobilities, whether for labor, marriage, pilgrimage, or war. The nature and scope of these mobilities has fundamentally changed over time in response to technological, economic, and political developments. What is different in modern times is that human mobility needs to be framed in relation to the global political system of nation-states, who set and control the parameters of (trans)national movements and prefer relatively immobilized subject populations. The development of travel documents (not in widespread use until the First World War) and controls at ports of entry and other checkpoints mark how governments categorize the rights to mobility across well-defined territories. Seeing it as a threat to their sovereignty and security, a disorder in the system, a thing to control, modern states have preoccupied themselves with the ordering and disciplining of mobile peoples—be they nomads or pastoralists, gypsies, homeless people, runaway slaves, or labor migrants (Scott 1998). While mobility has certainly increased, with the global capitalist system demanding increased transnational labor mobility, attempts to control and restrict movement are just as characteristic of the era in which we live (Shamir 2005; Turner 2007). In fact, post-9/11 policies have made it much more difficult for many to travel freely. In a world that is perceived to be in constant flux, control over people’s mobility potential and movement has become a central concern for projects of management and governance.

Secondly, mobility does not imply that people become more similar or equal. The movement of people may, and often does, create or reinforce difference and inequality, as well as blending or erasing

such differences. Despite overly general celebration and romanticization, the ability to move (sometimes termed *motility*) is spread very unevenly within societies and across the planet. The world may be full of mobilities and complex interconnections; there are also huge numbers of people whose experience is marginal or excluded from these movements and links. This presents a serious criticism to the overgeneralized discourse that assumes “without any research to support it that the whole world is on the move, or at least that never have so many people, things and so on been moving across international borders” (Friedman 2002: 33). Border-crossing mobilities as a form of human experience are still the exception rather than the norm. The concern with mobility, while necessary, has made some scholars lose sight of the continued importance of place-based practices and modes of consciousness for the (re)production of cultures and societies. The incessant mobility that is often seen these days as characteristic of contemporary life is only one part of the story (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000). The very processes that produce movement and global linkages also promote immobility, exclusion, and disconnection (Alvarez 1995; Tsing 2005). Besides, people can move without being mobile and be mobile without moving.

Mobilities and borders are not antithetical. As Chalfin reminds us, “This is not a world without borders but a world in which all borders operate according to uniform terms that make mobility their priority” (2008: 525). An increasing concern with networks and movement, especially in the context of thinking about globalization and cosmopolitanism (largely theorized in terms of trans-border flows), has stimulated theorizing on the changing nature of borders (Rumford 2006). Transnational borders are not singular and unitary, but are designed to encourage various kinds of mobility (business travelers, tourists, migrant workers, students) and discourage others (illegal migrants, refugees). The post 9/11 era is full of examples showing how globalization dynamics produce significant forms of immobility for the political regulation of persons. Consideration of these themes breaks with theoretical tendencies that celebrate unbounded movement, and instead focuses us on the political-economic processes by which people are bounded, emplaced, and allowed or forced to move (Cunningham and Heyman 2004). Such studies show how mobility is materially grounded. The physical movement of people entails not only a measure of economic, social, and cultural mobility, but a corresponding evolution of institutions and well-determined “circuits of human mobility” (Lindquist 2009: 7) too. To assess the extent or nature of movement, or, indeed, even “observe” it sometimes, one needs to spend a lot of time studying things that stand still: the borders, institutions, and

territories of nation-states, and the sedimented “home” cultures of those that do not move. In the words of Tsing, various “kinds of ‘friction’ inflect motion, offering it different meanings. Coercion and frustration join freedom as motion is socially informed” (2005: 6).

Mobility is a central metaphor for the contemporary world, both in its physical form and its imaginative implications. Mobility explicitly privileges the notion of movement and process rather than stability and fixity across both space and time. People are moving all the time but not all movements are equally meaningful and life-shaping. Physical movement is the natural, normal given of human social life; what is abnormal, changeable, and historically constructed is the idea that human societies need to construct political borders and institutions that define and constrain spatial mobility in particular, regularized ways, such that immobility becomes the norm. Mobility may well be the key difference and otherness producing machine of our age, involving significant inequalities of speed, risk, rights, and status, and mobile people are engaged in the construction of new, complex politics of location and travel. At the same time, there is no clear-cut separation between choice and constraint, between forced and voluntary mobility. The most irreversible forms of mobility (long-term migration, residential mobility) are increasingly supplanted by more reversible forms (daily mobility, trips, migratory circulation), a trend that goes hand in hand with the flexibility required by the capitalist system. The question is not so much about the overall rise or decline of mobility, but how such mobility has been formed, regulated, and distributed around different regions and areas and how the formation, regulation, and distribution of such mobility are shaped and patterned by existing social, political, and economic structures of the contemporary world.

What is the analytical purchase of mobility as one of the root metaphors in contemporary anthropological theorizing? What are the (dis)advantages of looking at the current human condition through the lens of mobility? How do individual mobility paths converge into collective itineraries? In this special issue, we do not want to discuss human mobility as a brute fact but rather analyze how mobilities, as socio-cultural constructs, are experienced and imagined. How are various forms of movement made meaningful, and how do the resulting ideologies of mobility circulate across the globe and become implicated in the production of mobile practices? How do people envision their potential for mobility (or motility), under what conditions do they enact that perceived right, and under what conditions is that right denied to them in practice? These and other pressing issues related to mobility are addressed in the various contributions.

None of the contributors began the research reported here by thinking about mobilities as such. Instead, issues related to (im)mobility arose from research on other topics: tourism, migration, and global flows of commodities. While this might be seen as a limitation, in which certain key questions might not have been addressed, we believe that it rather reflects one of the greatest advantages of ethnographic research. There is a risk that the fast-growing field of mobility studies might replicate one of the problems affecting the comparable field of transnationalism. If mobility (or transnationalism) is the topic of research, there is a great risk that different interpretations of what is going on will be neglected, or that only patterns that fit the paradigm will be considered, or that only extremes of (hyper)mobility or (im)mobility will be given attention. In a similar way, transnationalism was criticized for sampling on the dependent variable: paying most attention to those who maintained transnational social fields rather than assimilating to the local culture(s). Another risk involved emphasizing particularly surprising and exotic juxtapositions. The first generation of transnationalism researchers also began with other questions and noticed the patterns that did not fit prevailing assumptions in social sciences, so that for them transnationalism emerged from fieldwork rather than defined it. The result is that, while each contributor has engaged heavily with mobility studies, they are also engaged in questioning what exactly a mobilities perspective has to contribute (cf. Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Urry 2007), and what it neglects while emphasizing movement.

In his contribution, Noel Salazar convincingly demonstrates the importance of the imagination in structuring (im)mobility in relation to both tourism and migration. Certain types of people are perceived as local and immobile even when they are in fact mobile, particularly in the imagined moral economies of tourist landscapes. Ana Vivaldi also pays close attention to the linkages and interface between imagined identities and mobility. The urban Toba of Argentina organize their lives around movements between the city and the "bush," and indeed without such movement many would have great difficulty in making ends meet. Indigeneity creates an identity where they are seen as out of place in the cities, and subject to various forms of exclusion which restrict their movements in the city. She adopts Anna Tsing's idea of frictions to help analyze these processes, as do Salazar and Smart and Smart. Mobility creates tensions, and the distinct trajectories of movement that individuals adopt shape their life, but also the places where they live.



Jenny Chio also pays close attention to these issues of movement back home, in her examination of tourist promotion in Guizhou province, China. As with Salazar's article, peasants are seen as "rooted" in the land and this influences development policies, but return movement is not certain and creates conflict, particularly when the place one has left is being transformed through tourist promotion strategies. She develops ideas of moral orders of mobility to consider the complexity of these dynamics. Such moral evaluation of (im)mobility resonates with Alan Smart and Josephine Smart's article, which focuses on a neglected dimension of science and technology, the ways in which they can be mobilized to restrict and discourage mobility for certain kinds of entities, whether people, animals, or disease organisms. A case study of mad cow disease illustrates how ideas of what should be kept from moving has had immense impact on the global economy both in the past and the present. By contrast to Salazar's focus on the imaginaries of movement, Smart and Smart tries to construct a genealogy of what is not imagined, and is almost invisible, in our dominant ideas about science and technology. Our cultural imagination of technology is heavily laden with ideas that it inevitably accelerates our lives and the world, but there is also a neglected history of technologies that are deployed to slow or prevent movement, such as quarantine.

This special issue, we hope, has demonstrated how important it is that anthropologists "take on" mobility, in both senses. The ethnographic sensibilities of fieldworkers who learn about mobility while studying other processes and issues, and who can situate movement in the multiple contexts between which people move, can both extend the utility of the mobilities approach, and insist on attention to other dynamics that might not be considered if the focus is first and last on (im)mobility as such.

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